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Substantive questions

Integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 11 of its resolution 51/138 B of 13 December 1996, the General Assembly referred to the integration of United Nations information centres with the field offices of the United Nations system in general. The Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue the integration exercise in a cost-effective manner and whenever feasible, on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the views of the host country and ensuring that the information functions and the autonomy of United Nations information centres are not adversely affected and to report thereon to the Committee on Information.

2. As requested by the General Assembly, the present report provides an update on the status of the integration exercise since the last report on the subject was prepared for consideration by the Committee on Information at its sixteenth session, in 1994 (A/AC.198/1994/5).

II. Background

3. In his 1994 report, the Secretary-General stated that the main objectives underlying his 1992 decision to integrate the United Nations information centres with the field operations of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were:

(a) To present a unified image of the United Nations in the field;

(b) To enhance information activities in all areas of the Organization's work, including development issues;

(c) To achieve economies of scale through the sharing of common services;

(d) To facilitate inter-agency coordination and avoid duplication.

4. Agreements between the Department of Public Information and UNDP were reached in 1992, and joint letters were subsequently sent to the 16 offices mentioned in paragraph 5 below, outlining policies and guidelines for the integrated operation. These letters specified, in particular, that there should be respect for the prevailing rules and regulations of the United Nations Secretariat regarding administrative, budgetary and personnel management in the information centres.

5. When integration was implemented in 1992, it involved information centres in those locations where the

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UNDP Resident Representative or United Nations Resident Coordinator was serving concurrently as full-time Director of the United Nations information centre, with the exception of Cairo. Since then, 18 information centres, namely, Algiers, Ankara, Antananarivo, Asunción, Bucharest, Cairo, Colombo, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, La Paz, Lomé, Managua, Maseru, Monrovia, Panama City, San Salvador and Yangon, have been integrated. The information centres in Kabul, Monrovia and San Salvador, however, are temporarily closed.

6. In February 1996, the Government of the Philippines indicated its support for the integration of the United Nations information centre in Manila with the UNDP office in the Philippines. Pending final agreement, the United Nations Resident Coordinator has been designated as Acting Director of the centre.

7. In 1995, the General Assembly, in its resolution 50/31 B of 6 December 1995, recommended the continuation of the integration exercise whenever feasible, on a case-by-case basis, while taking into account the views of the host country and ensuring that the information functions and autonomy of United Nations information centres are not adversely affected. As part of the reform measures announced by the Secretary-General in March 1997, the integration process will be continued.

III. Overview of present situation

8. The integration process has proceeded along the lines indicated by the General Assembly. Cooperation between the Department of Public Information and UNDP in the integrated centres has resulted in cost savings in two areas: reduction in the number of international staff by more than 30 per cent since 1992, and the installation and maintenance of shared communications systems.

9. A Department of Public Information/UNDP mechanism has been established at the highest levels to address specific problems relating to integration. The group regularly examines the current situation in the field with a view to developing a framework for enhanced cooperation, while ensuring full implementation of the public information mandate. Accordingly, the Department expects to be consulted in the selection and performance evaluation of those Resident Representatives and/or Resident Coordinators who also serve as Directors of United Nations information centres. The Department continues its efforts to improve the capacity of those officials to promote an informed understanding of the work of the Organization among local constituents in a timely and cost-effective manner. In addition, the Department has directed specific attention to strengthening the role of National Information Officers, who have day-to-day responsibility for programme delivery in the integrated centres. The Department is also making every effort to enhance feedback from the integrated centres. Mindful of the importance of information as a strategic tool for successful field operations, the Department has recently expanded its briefing programmes for the heads of all UNDP field offices.

10. As regards efficiency gains and cost savings in the use of information technologies, about 20 United Nations information centres, including 9 that are integrated and/or headed by a UNDP Resident Representative, currently benefit from sharing UNDP communications facilities. This cooperation includes the provision of such services as Higgins electronic mail or access to the Internet by means of a UNDP link. Some information centres also share local area network (LAN) environments with UNDP and receive LAN maintenance services provided by UNDP.